

Operation: Military Kids

Author: Dona Leonhard

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Program Description

Operation: Military Kids (OMK) is the U.S. Army's collaborative effort with America's communities to support children and youth of National Guard, Army Reserve and Active Duty families impacted by the Global War on Terrorism. State 4-H Military Liaisons lead OMK State Teams in 34 states in partnership with the National Guard, Army Reserve, the Military Child Education Coalition, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, The American Legion, and schools. These and other community organizations are joining Army Child & Youth Services to support "Suddenly Military" youth before, during, and after the deployment of a parent or loved one.

"Suddenly military" is the term used to describe youth in families of the National Guard and Reserve. Up until the point of their parents' deployment, these youth do not define themselves as living in a military family. The kids may feel isolated because they do not know many others who are in similar deployment situations. Their parent has a civilian job and their commitment to the military consists of one drill weekend a month and two weeks in the summer. The situation created by a deployment places unique stress on the youth and their families. Through residential youth camps, video productions, and family events Operation: Military Kids targets youth who have been affected by a loved one's deployment. Programs are being designed for these "suddenly military" youth to help them find positive ways to cope with the stress of their parents' deployment.

OMK Mission:

The mission of OMK is to support deployed National Guard, Army Reserve and Active Duty Soldiers' children living in communities across the country by:

- Creating networks of people, organizations and other resources to support "suddenly military" children and youth where they live.
- Delivering a wide range of recreational, social and educational programs for military youth living in civilian communities
- Acknowledging the strengths and sacrifices of military kids as everyday home front
- Supporting military kids coping with the stress of knowing their deployed parents may be in harm's way
- Educating the public on the impact of the deployment cycle on Soldiers, families, kids and the community as a whole

Why is OMK needed?

- * When National Guard, Army Reserve and other military parents living in civilian communities are mobilized, their children suddenly have unique needs for special support services.
- * These "suddenly military" kids need to connect with other youth in similar situations. They seek friends and adults who can empathize and can help them cope with their new world.

How does OMK operate?

- * State 4-H Military Liaisons lead OMK State Teams consisting of representatives from the National Guard, Army Reserve, the Military Child Education Coalition, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, The American Legion, Schools, and other community organizations.
- * OMK state teams work to create networks of youth workers, educators, counselors and community service agencies in communities across the state to support military children and youth

OMK Infrastructure (Programmatic Areas):

Ready, Set, Go! Training (RSG)

Led by trained facilitators, RSG! Trainings are designed to develop local support networks of youth workers, educators, counselors and community service agencies. These workshops offer an insight into military culture and the deployment cycle and suggest ways to understand the needs of and provide support to military kids and their families through community resources.

Hero Packs (HP)

Hero Packs serve as a tangible expression of support for military families from their communities and OMK Partners. Hero Packs are backpacks filled by non-military youth with mementos and items designed to help connect kids with their deployed parent. They are a way to *hand-deliver* a salute to military children & youth for their strength and sacrifices while parents are deployed. A Hero Pack project involves youth groups and adults in a valuable community service effort that also builds awareness and fosters community support for geographically dispersed military families.

Speak Out for Military Kids (SOMK)

SOMK is a youth –led, adult supported project that generates community awareness of issues faced by youth of military families. Through simulations, interviews, and research, participants begin to understand what military families go through during deployment. As the youth form speakers bureaus they develop presentations, public service announcements, videos, and other materials and actively seek opportunities to share their experiences with others in the community (e.g. school assemblies, Service club meetings and events, city council meetings, fairs, community activities, and teacher in-service programs).

Mobile Technology Labs (MTL)

The labs are used to facilitate connections between deployed soldiers and the children & youth left behind. Any OMK partner such as The American Legion, Boys & Girls Clubs, Schools, 4-H can request and use the laptop computers, digital camera, video recorder, printer, scanner and the necessary software and materials for children and youth to send a personal messages to their deployed loved one.

Residential Youth Camps

OMK residential youth camps for suddenly military kids are held at various locations throughout Ohio. Campers are charged a nominal registration fee and the remaining costs of camp are covered by sponsorships. The camps are staffed by 4-H teen camp counselors, teens who had parents in the military, collegiate 4-H members, and young adults who were former 4-H camp counselors, as well as 4-H and military staff and adult volunteers. For many youth it is their first

camping experience and one of the few times they meet others who are also experiencing a deployment. Campers participate in team building activities as well as sessions such as digital photography, crafts, cooking, archery, boating, swimming, snorkeling, and fishing, in addition to typical camp activities (e.g., campfires, skits).

Regional Teams

Along with the National Guard, OMK works to create regional teams based in the eight National Guard regions. Video teleconferences are held to introduce the team concept. These teams are a work in progress and are very motivated and energetic to help. The goal is to create a critical mass of support around the state. These teams may spearhead additional activities for military youth.

Military Family Events

The Ohio National Guard Family Readiness Conference is held each year to prepare National Guard families for the military lifestyle. 4-H staff, teens, and volunteers assist with the youth conference portion of the program, which allows youth to come together in a safe haven to discuss deployment related topics and develop a close team of friends to call upon when deployment happens.

Deployment and Homecoming Briefings are meetings held to inform soldiers and their families of the benefits a family can receive during and after deployment. As much as OMK is able to arrange, 4-H Educators, members, and volunteers offer 4-H programming activities to suddenly military youth while their parents are in deployment or homecoming meetings. Younger children participate in 4-H Cloverbud crafts, elementary youth completed team building activities, while teens participate in SOMK.

Zoo Days are offered throughout the year. Several hundred military families travel to their nearest zoo to receive free or reduced admission prices on OMK's military day at the zoo. A tent or auditorium is typically delegated as OMK's for military day. This location is where free snacks and family photos take place.

The Ohio State University Athletic Department offers OMK families free or half-priced admission to at least 2 sporting events each year. Normally, hockey, women's basketball, and men's baseball each host a military game day where all military members and their dependents receive reduced admission.

The Ohio State Fair already offers free admission to military service members and veterans on Military Day. OMK partnered with the Ohio State Fair to provide free admission for the families of these service members. OMK has a display booth to promote awareness of suddenly military youth. This booth highlighted OMK's programs with displays and an OMK year-in-review video was shown throughout the day on a mobile tech lab computer. On the tables inside the fair booth, information that can help families during deployment stressors was promoted.